

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands Are Not an ‘Empty Space’

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1. INTRODUCTION

In July earlier this year (2017), I had the opportunity of a series of interactions with long-time residents of areas in and around Port Blair, the administrative headquarters of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. One of the key pivots of the presentations I made was a recent plan for the development of the islands that was first publicized by the NITI Aayog in late 2015 and has been pushed aggressively ever since at various levels. The plan is titled ‘An approach paper on “Prospects of Island Development – Options for India”’ (Anon. 2015), and it proposes a range of projects. These include a railway line connecting Port Blair in the south to Diglipur in the north of the Andaman group; a petrochemical complex and a special economic zone (SEZ) for Mayabandar in Middle Andaman Island; a port and a huge tourism complex in Little Andaman Island; and a trans-shipment terminal, a port, and wind and solar energy farms in Great Nicobar Island.

In a meeting of the NITI Aayog held in September 2016, a part of the plan for promoting high-end tourism was granted approval. In November 2016, a follow-up call was issued for proposals for the ‘Preparation of Concept Development Plans and Detailed Master Plans for Holistic Development of 10 Islands’ (NITI Aayog 2016). A few months later, in February 2017, the incumbent Lt. Governor of the islands, Prof Jagdish Mukhi, also

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announced a Rs. 2,400 crore 240-kilometre railway project to connect Port Blair with Diglipur—the stated rationale being that this will be a strategic asset and also boost tourism in the islands.

2. FORCED IRRELEVANCES

One framework that the NITI Aayog plan and proposal should have considered is the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANPATR), promulgated in 1956 (ANPATR 1956). Under the provisions of this regulation, significant areas of the islands have been protected for the island's indigenous communities, like the Jarawa, Onge, and Shompen. These parts of the islands are the last remaining strongholds of the tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests that once clothed the entire island chain, and are crucial habitat, therefore, for the famed biological diversity of these tropical islands (Sekhsaria 2013). Significantly, however, the NITI Aayog approach paper of about 40 pages does not mention it at all, even as it goes on to propose a number of projects that will impinge directly on the land and rights of the indigenous communities protected under the regulation. What is additionally shocking is there was no accounting in the NITI Aayog plan of the fact that the islands are prone to extensive tectonic activity and were impacted severely in the aftermath of the earthquake and the tsunami of 2004 (Abbany 2016; ASC 2010; Sekhsaria 2009).

The central point that I sought to communicate during my presentations and interactions was that this particular plan continued in line with others from the past where concerns over the islands' indigenous peoples, ecological diversity, and geological volatility and vulnerability were being given a complete go-by. If anything, the vulnerability of the islands and its denizens was only being increased manifold by a non-accounting of their uniqueness and specific socio-cultural-ecological-historical context.

I was surprised by the reaction of the islanders on two counts of general non-awareness. One, overall, this community did not know of the ecological richness, on the one hand, or of their extreme vulnerability to the tectonic volatility of the island chain. Two, a large number of them did not know at all about the NITI Aayog approach paper, leave alone the details of the specific proposals that had been made.

The implications of this are indeed are multifold, and can be understood simultaneously as a cause of the present state of affairs as also an outcome of ways of thinking about and looking at the islands. The interactions reinforced for me the belief that all efforts notwithstanding, the islands remain on the fringes of the national consciousness and are considered

relevant only as adjuncts to a nation that is destined to be nothing less than a global superpower. Nothing exemplifies this better than how the islands are being mobilized as an important outpost in the rapidly escalating narrative of their geopolitical and strategic importance.

3. A NUCLEAR POWER PLANT FOR THE ISLANDS

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have always occupied an important place in the Indian imagination as a security and strategic outpost. The sentiment has been expressed repeatedly over the years, and its logic was evident in the comments made in 2012 by Admiral Nirmal Verma, then Chief of Naval Staff. Speaking on the occasion of the commissioning of INS Baaz on Great Nicobar Island as the first Naval Air Station in the Nicobars, Verma (2012) made the point very unequivocally:

The islands of the Andaman and Nicobar group have always occupied the consciousness of the security and defence community of our nation. The geographic disposition of the archipelago, separated as it is by more than 650 nautical miles from our mainland, offers a vital geo-strategic advantage to India. (...) Apart from geography, the economic potential of the islands is also remarkable, being endowed with a vast Exclusive Economic Zone, accounting for almost 30% of India's entire EEZ. They also sit astride some of the busiest shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, most carrying strategic cargo for the East Asian economies.

In a fast-changing international economic and security environment, the islands have become an even more highly valued asset. It has become explicit in articulations such as prominent commentator Ashok Malik's 2014 article in the *Hindustan Times*, where he referred to these islands as 'a prized piece of mid-ocean real estate that policy gurus in Delhi have consistently neglected and left unexploited' (Malik 2014).

Nothing signifies this better and more chillingly than the late, and former President of India, APJ Abdul Kalam's vision for the islands. Speaking during his inaugural address at a security seminar organized by the defence establishment in Port Blair in 2009, he visioned the future islands to have among other things a:

250 MW nuclear power station on one of the Islands for A & N exclusively, ... bases for static aircraft carrier with dynamic warfare system & connectivity between the Islands with fiber optic network, a nuclear submarine based fleet and ... a robust tsunami forecasting and communication system (Anon. 2009).

The scale of intervention proposed—and its hugely technocratic-militaristic tenor—is in line with the growing defence and strategic interest in this group of islands. In proposing a nuclear power plant in one of the world's

most seismically active zones, however, it betrays a complete lack of awareness of the geologic, tectonic, and historical contexts of these islands. Not only is there no assessment of the economic and technical viability of such a power plant (how it will be constructed; how the power will be evacuated), the vulnerability and risk generated on account of its location in this seismically active zone has not been accounted for at all either.

4. TERRA NULLIUS?

Whether these huge projects will indeed be executed is something only time will tell, but what these ideas betray, like in the case of Kalam's nuclear plant suggestion, is a stark ignorance of the historical, social, ecological, and legal context of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The envisioning of such projects does not acknowledge factors such as the extreme seismicity of these islands—the earthquake that caused the gigantic tsunami of December 2004 was epicentred only a 100 nautical miles from the Nicobar Islands. It ignores the islands' ecological fragility—the high diversity and endemism of plant and animal species—and even the legal provisions for forest protection and the rights of the indigenous peoples. The premise, clearly, is what anthropologist Vishvajit Pandya has described in the case of these islands as that of 'terra nullius'—empty, unexplored, virgin territory that is waiting to be acted upon and operationalized.

One needs only to scratch the surface a little to realize how deeply flawed and violative these projects and visioning are of constitutional rights and of moral propriety. Ideas of vulnerability, sensitivity, and fragility are being given a complete go-by. In the end, the price will be paid only by these islands and their varied human and non-human denizens. It is not a new story, but it has a magnified resonance here because these islands are unique and special in more ways than one!

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